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LIBBIE RIFKIN: There are more students with learning disabilities, or differences, or other forms of neuro-divergance that come into somebody's classroom experience. There are more folks like that at Georgetown than faculty assume.

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KIM HUISMAN LUBRESKI: That was Libby Rifkin, the founding director of the program in Disability Studies at Georgetown and a teaching professor in the Department of English. In our conversations with faculty and staff at Georgetown, this was an oft repeated theme. There are simply far more students on campus that fall under the broad umbrella of disability than is typically recognized. Here at Georgetown, 1,200 students, or 16% of the student body, have formal academic accommodations for disabilities. While the actual number is likely higher, it's on par with the 19% reported by the US Department of Education.

JOE KING: You're listening to What We Are Learning About Learning-- and I hope that doesn't surprise you-- a podcast about higher ed teaching and learning, created and produced by the Center for New Designs in Learning and scholarship at Georgetown University. For this episode, we spoke with faculty and staff who work on building awareness of best practices, as well as advocate for students with disabilities. I'm Joe King.

KIM HUISMAN LUBRESKI: And I'm Kim Huisman Lubreski. In thinking about disability, we often start with the legal framework for disabilities. We spoke with Joe Fisher, the executive director of the Academic Resource Center at Georgetown, who described the evolving nature of how we see and define disability, and how the American with Disabilities Act is applied at Georgetown.

JOSEPH FISHER: I say over and over again that we take the force of the ADA Amendments Act quite seriously. So we take a very broad definition of disability. And certainly, almost every day, we receive information from students that alerts us to new and emerging categorisations of disability. That it is a part of human diversity and perhaps a definition of human embodiment that is constantly subject to change.

JOE KING: Modeled after the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the ADA was passed in 1990 to prohibit discrimination against individuals with disabilities in all areas of public life, including jobs, schools, and transportation. Its purpose is to ensure that people with disabilities have the same rights and opportunities as everyone else. The number of people whom this changing category may involve is large but also widely considered to be hard to pin down.

Libbie Rifkin, our colleague you heard at the top of the episode, describes the most common disability identities at Georgetown and notes how the official number of students with disabilities may be underestimated.

LIBBIE RIFKIN: The vast majority identify as having a mental disability, or a mental illness issue-- a psychiatric disability-- which certainly can have implications for classroom performance and experience, even if it's not a diagnosed learning disability. So that if somebody has anxiety or depression, that can really contribute to who they are and how they behave as a student.

And then the next most common disability identity that our students hold is some kind of learning disability. Fewer actually register at the ARC because getting a diagnosis can be challenging, and expensive, and incredibly time consuming.

KIM HUISMAN LUBRESKI: Another key piece of context as we began this conversation was exploring the language we use to describe individuals with disabilities. Some people prefer people-first language,

such as people with disability. Whereas, others prefer identity-first language as in disabled people. Some see people first language as a way to reduce the dehumanization of disability. Quite often, identity first language is used to express pride and celebrate disability identity. Our conversations with our Georgetown colleagues capture the diversity of linguistic preferences. Here's Libbie Rifkin.

LIBBIE RIFKIN: The basic premise is that disability is not an identity or a social location that is necessarily negative. And so it does not require euphemistic language. I find that languages like differently abled, or even special needs, is sort of designed to kind of dance around that word disability.

And in my own practice, both as a disability studies scholar, and thinker, and teacher, and as a parent of a child with disabilities, I say just that-- either, child with disabilities, person with disabilities, or disabled child, disabled person. I think there's a little bit of a debate about this question of person-first versus identity-first language in the extended disability community. And so I try to be flexible and sort of just go with the flow of the room that I'm in around that. Many people claim disabled identity with a great deal of pride, and so have no problem saying I'm an autistic person, for instance.

JOE KING: And here's Joe Fisher, sharing the practice of naming the disability first. From a sort of political standpoint, I was at a student presentation the other day-- autistic person, right? Not, person with autism. So I think again, the students from the ground up are pushing for disability first. This is certainly something that I would push for as well. Because I think trying to mask disability is doing exactly that. It's pushing it to the margins.

KIM HUISMAN LUBRESKI: Ultimately, there's no monolithic or universal language shared across all people who have a disability. When interacting with someone who discloses their disability, we can show our respect for their language preference by asking them what their preference is. Here are Joe and Libbie again.

JOSEPH FISHER: As we always say, a human being has the right to insist on being referred to in a certain way, and we respect that. We would always do that.

LIBBIE RIFKIN: Obviously, people should be called what they want to be called and use language that's comfortable for them.

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JOE KING: Often, the discussion of disability in the classroom centers around accommodations. In other words, how do I accommodate students with different needs in my class, renovating what I've already built in order to meet those individual needs? We do, after all, have legal obligations to make accommodations for our students, so that they can participate fully in the learning experience. As we'll hear in a moment, we are in the middle of a shift away from solely relying on accommodations. But they're still important. Particularly given that, in many cases, we're working with structures that have problems and that have been handed down to us.

JOSEPH FISHER: I very routinely say that the accommodation model is always going to exist. And I just think that's true. I mean, if you just isolate this campus, we've got buildings that were built a very long time ago. So you are always going to need to add the ramp, right? That is the accommodation model. Building was not built with accessibility first. We would hope that new buildings are.

So the need to retrofit, I think, is always going to exist, whether we're talking about physical architecture or curricular architecture-- educational academic architecture. We're always going to need to retrofit. This

is why people are running around now putting microphones in classrooms, so that we can record things that we hadn't thought about two or three years ago.

I have some problems with the term accommodation. But I don't think that it's wrong. But I do want to get the language of accessibility first and foremost into everyone's thinking to the best extent that I can. I think we should be talking about access-- accessing classes, accessing campus, accessing dormitory spaces, access, access, access.

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KIM HUISMAN LUBRESKI: And here's Libbie who discusses some of the challenges and solutions in creating an inclusive and accessible learning environment.

LIBBIE RIFKIN: Accessibility is a goal that we're always imperfectly approaching. And part of what I try to establish in those access needs check-ins, as well, is my own imperfection and my genuine desire-- but my inevitable failure-- in creating a perfectly accessible classroom space for everyone.

One thing I talk about a lot and think about a lot is this concept of access intimacy, which Mia Mingus, who is a queer, disabled activist of color, has developed. And it feels like a really necessary companion to something that's more like a universal design approach. This idea that I can design for maximal inclusiveness. That I can kind of think about all of the different ways my students might kind of manifest in the classroom. I think that wrapped around that needs to be this willingness to kind of find your students where they are, and be open, and actually even ask about their accessibility needs, and build that kind of encounter into the beginning of all your classes if possible.

JOE KING: In other words, what we really need is a paradigm shift from accommodations to accessibility. Building courses that anticipate and remove barriers to access before our students even arrive. Here's Libbie Rifkin.

LIBBIE RIFKIN: I think the distinction has a lot to do with time. When you are thinking about disability? Are you thinking about it at the outset of a project? Or are you thinking about it after the fact, when someone comes to you and says that something you've built or made needs to be altered?

So I think about accommodation as something that we are legally bound to do after the fact, or when somebody discloses that they have some form of disability. We are bound to make our spaces, and in this case our classroom spaces, accessible to those people. Often, we're told how to do that in a kind of legalistic way. But when we're designing for access and thinking about access, what we're really thinking about is inclusion and belonging. And that requires forethought, and planning, and an orientation toward maximal openness.

KIM HUISMAN LUBRESKI: Activist, artist, scholar, and Georgetown professor Mimi Khúc talked with us about creating a culture of access in the classroom, which goes beyond striving for accessibility before the semester begins by staying open throughout the semester.

MIMI KHÚC: I talk about creating a culture of access in the class. I actually don't use the language of accommodation. I use it in terms of referring to what the University language and policies are. But in the class itself, I talk about wanting to build access and less so accommodation.

And the difference that I like to point out to students is something I learned from a scholar named Margaret Price. And she helped me identify how accommodations tends to assume that your needs are stable, predictable, don't change over time versus access, which requires us to be much more creative.

If we think about, what do you need to succeed in this class? What do you need to feel like you can participate in this class? If the question is more open-ended like that, then we become much more creative in answering that question.

And so I want to create a culture in my classroom that students feel like they can talk about their needs, not feel ashamed about having needs. And then figuring out together, collectively-- because access is a collective, community project-- we figure out together how to meet everybody's needs as best as we can and to be flexible throughout.

JOSEPH FISHER: What we see from faculty is a not unreasonable trepidation about talking with students about these things. So they will get an accommodation letter from the ARC. It'll have accommodations listed. And they think, I must do these things. I have no idea how to do these things. But I'm going to find some way to make it work, Which is good, but it doesn't really get to that understanding of what the need is.

And then there might be other instances where we get-- I can't believe you would recommend these things. I'm not doing any of this. What do you mean? And the person who's left out of that conversation is the student.

And that's what we really try to foster as professors-- talk with your students. You don't need to talk diagnostically. You should not ask for personal information. But the question, how can this class be accessible to you? I have seen your accommodation letter and know you're working with the ARC. How can I make this class accessible to you? That is the kind of question that I think can establish that kind of intimacy. And I know it's challenging. I know there are limits to what professors can do, particularly in large classes. But any progress that we can make toward these kinds of conversations, I think is good progress.

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JOE KING: As it happens, many of us got a crash course in accessibility during our remote teaching experiences during the height of the pandemic. Joe reminds us that many of those practices extend accessibility to a greater number of students.

JOSEPH FISHER: I think what's missing there is, again, thinking about how the recording can facilitate or build universal design for everybody. And that's part of this too. It's not just about the one student who might need the recording. It's that everyone benefits from it. And the more we think in that way, the less the need for the one accommodation-- that that need decreases.

MIMI KHÚC: Some responses to the pandemic have been to become more flexible, to think about needs, to everyone learning how to use Zoom, everyone learning how to provide new ways of accessing material, accessing the teaching, new ways of connecting with each other. Those have been the good things. But I feel like now that we are moving towards back to in-person, there's a little bit of rolling back some of those gains of accessibility. Punitive attendance policies, punitive participation policies-- those are some of the main ones that I'm seeing. So not only can they not Zoom in during class, but even afterwards they can't access anything. And they have no way of making up that material.

Fixed deadlines. I know that's a big-- that's something people fight me on. People fight me on attendance policies and deadlines, because I don't take attendance in my classes. And I don't have fixed deadlines. And that freaks a lot of faculty out. But I need flexible deadlines all the time, as a worker, as a person. And I've never had my students exploit flexible deadlines to the point where I feel like they're lying or they're all taking advantage of me. I think they have a fear of being taken advantage of by students.

And what I've noticed is, if you create a classroom space that's mutually respectful and that thinks about everybody's needs, students buy into that. They totally buy into it. And they totally will try to meet the norms of the class and take care of each other. So they will super apologetically ask for an extension. And they feel so bad about it. And when I'm like totally fine-- I'm still grading. You know, it takes me days to grade. So a couple of days is not a big deal at all, because it's not going to create a burden on me to wait a couple of days.

Now, if 80% of my students are asking for like a three week extension, then that becomes a burden on me that doesn't meet my needs. I can't meet that. So we have to negotiate and figure something out. But the willingness to be flexible and negotiate with students is something I would really encourage faculty to consider, because we are all human. We all have needs.

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KIM HUISMAN LUBRESKI: So what does making this shift look like in real life in the classroom? What are some concrete practices faculty can embed in their courses to achieve that maximal inclusiveness that Libby talked about?

MIMI KHUC: Check-ins with students. So I actually do a pre-semester check-in. I send out a Google form-- I call it an access form-- where I ask students about their needs, so that I can figure out if my syllabus can actually meet those needs. And so some of the first questions I ask is, do you have safe and stable housing? Do you have access to having your basic needs met, like food, health care? Do you have internet access, stable Wi-Fi?

And I ask those things first, and then I start asking about the class requirements. OK, I'm thinking of these kinds of assignments, do these feel manageable? Do these feel like they are accessible to you? Do you have any access needs that you can anticipate? And here are some of my access needs for the class.

And so I do this at the beginning of semester. And I get students emailing me grateful just for the form before classes even start. And I haven't done anything yet, right? I haven't done anything to meet their needs yet. But just the fact of me asking, what are your needs, I recognize you have them-- and I recognize everybody has needs, not just students who identify as disabled, not just students who are able to get accommodations through paperwork, but that everybody has access needs. And they're different over time.

Just saying that at the beginning-- and there are other faculty who are doing this, too, in their own way-- it goes such a long way with students feeling like, OK, this is a class and a professor who is flexible, willing to think about me as a person, as a human, and willing to make this experience something that not only I learn something out of, but I will feel cared for, I will feel not dehumanized in the process.

LIBBIE RIFKIN: I also personally individually met for 10 minutes apiece with all 70 of my students at the beginning of the semester for an access needs check-in. And I'm hesitant to suggest that all faculty should or must do this, but I find it really useful in building a sense of trust with my students and just a sense of a kind of desire to know them that they experience. And then also, I develop a document where I take notes, and I at least have everything they identify as an access need kind of down. And whether I can actually adjust the class to accommodate all of those is, I say, almost always impossible.

My own access need is to have a one-on-one experience with all my students. I don't feel comfortable and I don't teach well when I don't know who's in the room. So that's me. I did it with 70, that was a lot this semester. So use the form to kind of call who really needs to be a one-on-one meeting.

The reason why I make everybody do it is because what I'm trying to get around is this imperative that students who have a diagnosed disability out themselves, disclose, and take on the burden of explaining their accommodations to their faculty entirely. I want everybody to have to do that as a way of demystifying the process, and sort of democratizing it, and reducing the stigma of doing that.

JOE KING: Within the general context of getting to know your students and their needs, there are some more specific practices that can help across the board.

LIBBIE RIFKIN: One thing I do in my classes is I require all students to volunteer to take notes on at least one day of the class. I develop a Google Doc with all the dates of the class, and they sign up. And then that Google Doc becomes the running notes for the class, and that we are caring for one another and helping to be an inclusive space by all carrying some of the load of that note-taking. There are more things now that I do, like including a PowerPoint, like trying to map each class in advance for students.

JOE KING: These kinds of practices, by pushing back against ableism, actually highlight the powerful effect that ableism has had on our students' experiences.

MIMI KHUC: This week we talked about ableism and the ways that it may manifest in people's lives. And I asked them to think about that, how does ableism manifest in your life? And then I asked them to make a list of five things they appreciate about themselves that are not related to achievement or productivity.

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KIM HUISMAN LUBRESKI: Participation grades, too, came under the microscope for its underlying assumptions and tendency to penalize quiet learners. How can we fairly assess something that's unrelated to the mastery of content and core skills and that may be natural for some, but not for others?

JOE FISHER: And you can add a layer of disability on top of that. What does it mean for the quiet student, perhaps for disability reasons, not to want to participate a bunch? What does it mean for the student who participates all the time to be doing so, perhaps for some-- these are unseen things that are part of this grading equation that I just don't think work very well.

JOE KING: Thinking about access in this way asks us to think about our course policies across the board. In our conversations with faculty and staff, we were especially struck by some assumptions that are built into attendance policies and deadlines and reflect an ablest culture that discriminates in favor of able-bodied people.

JOE FISHER: This insistence on attendance-- students can miss no classes whatsoever, students cannot turn in anything late, students cannot have extensions for any reason. These really rigid ways of thinking about how people learn and about how curriculum actually happens, those are definitely tied to ableism. So I think chipping away at that rigidity and kind of traditional approach to thinking about presence, thinking about absence, thinking about rigor, thinking about deadlines-- I'm not saying the classes have to be completely open. A journalism class with deadlines makes a good deal of sense, but there might be flexibility that can be built in other ways that will help students really meet the standards that you're setting forth in very particular ways.

MIMI KHUC: Even creating the categories of excused and not excused absences, those seem like normal, common faculty policies. And they're actually quite ablest. And students, they feel it, even if they don't have the language to call it that until they take a disability studies class and learn what ableism is. But they feel it because those kinds of policies limit our ability to say that we need things, right? What

kinds of needs are, quote unquote, "legitimate," and deserved, and excused absence, or deserve support and what kinds don't.

And then, suddenly, the professor becomes the arbiter of that, right? And the professor gets to decide that your excuse is not a good enough excuse, or that maybe you're lying, right? And so students feel dehumanized by these kinds of policies that don't allow for life to be hard, basically, for them. And so they feel like they have to perform like they are doing well all the time. I call that compulsory wellness. They have to perform like they're always well, they're doing great, they're high achieving. And that's also part of, I think, Georgetown culture.

So if we define care and then create structures of care simply to help us work better, or be more productive, or be excellent, we're actually not caring for ourselves as full humans, or caring for ourselves as producers only.

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KIM HUISMAN LUBRESKI: We also talked with staff and faculty about the tension between Kerr personnel's-- care for the whole person-- and the high-achieving stress culture at Georgetown. Here's Libbie Rifkin.

LIBBIE RIFKIN: Well, it's destructive to all of our students, not just our students with diagnosed or self-identified disabilities. I don't think it's something that's going to change any time soon, but ideas about productivity, and excellence, and ambition undergird higher education and they are ideas that are foundational to ableism that allow us to weed out people who are deserving of value and humanity based on their capacity to produce or excel. And that's destructive for all of us.

JOE KING: And here's Joe Fisher, reminding us that not all stress is equal.

JOE FISHER: What exactly is stress culture? In some ways, learning is stress. That's how we improve physically, cognitively is under stress and strain, to a certain extent. But there are obviously better kinds of stress than others.

KIM HUISMAN LUBRESKI: Generally, good stress can be motivating and help us focus our energy and concentration. Bad stress, however, is the kind that takes a heavy toll and can lead to health problems. It depletes us and feels inescapable. Mimi encourages students to use the spoon theory to help reduce stress and recognize their limits.

MIMI KHUC: Spoons is a metaphor for how much energy you have, and this is a language that came out of disability justice circles. The author is Christine Miserandino. And they were trying to explain what it's like to have lupus to a friend who doesn't have lupus, and the really limited energy they have and the limited number of spoons. If you have this many spoons, you have to be very intentional about how you use your spoons, because you will run out, or you'll have to borrow from the next day and deal with the consequences from borrowing in the future, and that showering takes a spoon that maybe you might want to save for cooking food later.

And so this metaphor is really helpful for students to realize that they have limits. Spoon theory is definitely my students' favorite thing they learn. We learn it the first or second week, and they love that. They love it because it's not just about disabled folks, because everybody has a limited number of spoons. We don't have infinite spoons, even if we are told that we should. Nobody has infinite number of spoons. Somebody who's going through a crisis or trauma is going to have fewer spoons than someone who isn't, and that's going to change over time.

So that, for me, has been the most helpful framework and language because it allows all students, no matter whether they identify as disabled or not, to think about their access needs and to think about accessibility for themselves.

JOE KING: Mimi also reminds us that it's important for faculty to focus on their own care as well.

MIMI KHUC: Some of these faculty policies are actually ablest to themselves. Some of these ways of teaching actually are really hard on faculty. And I noticed that faculty held on to some of those things during the pandemic in ways that were harmful to themselves as well. So I've actually shifted my own teaching to think about my own self-care, my own wellness during teaching.

KIM HUISMAN LUBRESKI: As one example, the same kind of flexibility you might apply to your students can also make your own life more balanced. Care for the student and care for the self can be mutually supporting goals. We hope these conversations help you further your own process of reflection about ways to move from accommodation to accessibility and cultivate a culture of care and inclusivity on campus and in the classroom.

As you consider what you might do to make your classrooms more accessible, please consider sharing your ideas with us. We're also interested in your thoughts, questions, stories, and ideas for future episodes. You can find the directions for sending us a voice memo in our show notes or on our website.

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JOE KING: Thank you for joining us for this episode of What We Are Learning About Learning. This episode was made possible by many people at CNDLS, including Molly Chehak, Meghan Modafferi, and David Ebenbach. Big thanks to our guests who shared their insights and observations with us about how to shift from accommodation to accessibility while navigating the ablest structures already in place-- Joe Fisher, Mimi Khuc, and Libbie Rifkin. Thanks also to Milo Stout for creating original music for the podcast. For more information about our podcast series and our guests, check out our show notes, where you'll find links to previous episodes, information about how to share your thoughts and ideas with us, our website and blog, and other resources. Again, I'm Joe King.

KIM HUISMAN LUBRESKI: And I'm Kim Huisman Lubreski. Thanks for listening.

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